

# NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES



## SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE

### Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions

Institution: Betsy Ross House

**NOTE:** This sample narrative conforms to a past set of grant guidelines. Please consult the revised guidelines for 2008 at: <http://www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/pag.html>.

#### **A. What activity (or activities) would the grant support?**

The Betsy Ross House requests a Preservation Assistance Grant of \$5000 to develop and implement an Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan for the site. The plan would recognize the potential for both manmade and natural emergencies, outline ways to avoid or lessen the impact of a disaster, and provide a strategy to deal with the aftermath. The plan will address issues relating to the collections, as well as for visitors and staff.

For the project, the Betsy Ross House (BRH) will retain the services of a consultant from the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA) located in Philadelphia. The planning process will consist of a series of site visits, meetings, and telephone consultations between the consultant and BRH staff. The CCAHA consultant will provide guidance, assessment tools, and technical information to assist in the completion of a specially tailored Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan.

#### **B. What are the content and size of the humanities collections that are the focus of the project?**

The BRH collections consist of tools, furnishings and decorative arts of the 18th-century and items with a documented provenance to Betsy Ross and her descendents. There are objects that document or illustrate Betsy Ross, the flag, and the development of the Betsy Ross story, including archives that are relevant to the history of the American Flag House and Betsy Ross Memorial Association. Approximately 5600 items make up the collections and they consist of two types of materials—paper-based archival items and three-dimensional objects. The archives are comprised of about 5000 books, letters, photographs, manuscripts, journals, scrapbooks and advertisements that document and/or illustrate Betsy Ross's life story, the flag, and the history of the museum. These materials include:

- The 1791 Bible in which Betsy Ross' husband recorded pertinent family information, including the birth and death dates of their children

- An 1815 Quaker marriage certificate of Betsy Ross's daughter, which bears the signature of Ross and other prominent Quakers
- Several letters and signed affidavits from 1892 through 1903 in which Ross' grandchildren recount their grandmother's story and attest to the truthfulness of it
- The letters, journals, scrapbooks and manuscripts of Charles Weisgerber, the man who led the campaign to purchase the Betsy Ross House from private ownership and open it as a public museum
- Institutional records that document the 106-year history of the museum

The 3-dimensional object collection is made up of about 600 items that date from 1750 to the present. Many of the items have a documented provenance to Betsy Ross, including:

- A circa 1750 walnut chest-on-chest
- A circa 1770 Chippendale side chair
- Two early 19th-century rush-bottom chairs
- An early 19th-century pair of eyeglasses with the original case
- A late 18th-century silver snuffbox
- A late 18th-century silk petticoat

There are also numerous early 19th-century items from Ross's children and grandchildren, such as:

- A rare Quaker doll, which belonged to Ross's granddaughter
- An oil portrait of Ross's daughter
- ilk flags made by Ross's daughter and granddaughter
- Several items from the country estate of Ross's daughter

There are approximately 50 objects in the collection that illustrate how, for over 100 years, advertisers and product manufacturers have incorporated Betsy Ross's name or image into the design or marketing of their products. A few of these items are:

- A circa 1900 Betsy Ross brand cigar box
- A Betsy Ross brand bread bag
- Early 20th-century Betsy Ross brand sewing needles

Considered to be another important aspect of the collection is the 1740s Georgian-style townhouse itself, with Flemish bond pattern brickwork and original architectural elements. Much of the original building envelope remains intact.

### **C. How are these humanities collections used?**

The Betsy Ross House is the only known museum in the nation that actively collects artifacts that interpret or are related to the historical and legendary Betsy Ross. A majority of the collections have been acquired to furnish the historic house as an 18th-century middling class residence and trade workshop. The BRH is also unique in that it is the only historic site that collects and interprets objects for a recreated 18th-century upholstery shop. Unlike most

historic house museums where visitors can tour homes of the elite, the Betsy Ross House is one of the few places in the country where one can actually see how a colonial, middle class, urban tradesperson would have lived. Located in an annex building behind the historic house is a gallery for changing exhibitions.

Roughly 75% of the museum's 3-dimensional object collection is on permanent exhibition in both the historic house and gallery. With nearly 280,000 visitors per year and the majority of the collections on view, exhibitions and period rooms are the major vehicle through which interpretation takes place. Comments from visitors who examine personal artifacts that belonged to Betsy Ross regularly tell us that viewing these objects was a highlight of their experience.

The buildings and grounds are laden with history and retain an amazing record of our culture's changing attitudes towards the preservation and presentation of the past. As one of the earliest sites of historic preservation in the nation, numerous important preservation architects have been involved with the site, including R. Brognard Okie, Grant Miles Simon and George Edwin Brumbaugh. Their work on the house allows us to glimpse into not only 18th-century daily life, but also the changing ways in which our society engages history.

The BRH is well known for its mission to educate a wide segment of the public, but it also plays an important role for the academic community. The archival documents, photographs, books and other paper collections are maintained for research purposes. Students, writers and historians who are interested in researching Betsy Ross and her family, the flag-making story, and the 106-year history of this museum use these items regularly. Many researchers use the archives to study Charles Weisgerber—artist and founder of the museum. Through his relentless fundraising campaign to purchase the house from private ownership, Weisgerber was the person who was largely responsible for making Betsy Ross a household name and a nationally known historic figure. The BRH is also contacted regularly by writers and publishers who are seeking images and information for their publications.

#### **D. What is the nature and mission of your institution?**

The Betsy Ross House is an historic house museum that celebrates and interprets the legendary maker of the first American flag. According to her daughters and grandchildren, Betsy Ross made the first flag while living in this house. The Board approved mission states, "The American Flag House and Betsy Ross Memorial, also known as the Betsy Ross House, is dedicated to the preservation, maintenance and administration of this historic site and acknowledges the significance of Betsy Ross in American History. Through interpretation and scholarship, our goal is to educate the public concerning the role played by Betsy Ross, a colonial middle-class woman in Philadelphia. Furthermore, this site will be recognized as an integral part of the Old City neighborhood, the Historic District and the museum community." Programs are designed to bring to life the working and living conditions of an eighteenth century artisan. The House addresses the controversy of the origin of the first official American flag and interprets Betsy Ross' contribution as a patriot and an entrepreneurial woman who managed her own household and business. In this way, the BRH commemorates both the legendary event and the historic Betsy Ross. An excellent example of Colonial "middling" class architecture, the house also allows visitors to see an example of

how a female tradesperson lived and worked in 18th-century Philadelphia.

With a total annual operating budget of [deleted], the BRH has a staff consisting of six full-time and twelve part-time employees. There are also a number of volunteers who donate their time during special events at the site. The site is open daily from April through September and is closed on Mondays from October through March. The operating hours are 10 A.M. to 5 P.M.

**E. Has your institution ever had a preservation or conservation assessment?**

In 1997 the Betsy Ross House participated in the American Association of Museum's Museum Assessment Program (MAP). Betty Monkman, Associate Curator of the White House provided the peer review and prepared the final institutional assessment report.

The building and collections were the subject of a Conservation Assessment Program (CAP) in 1998, sponsored by the Institute for Museum and Library Services. The evaluation included an *Architectural Assessment Report* by Martin Jay Rosenblum, R.A. and Associates and a *General Conservation Assessment Report* by Nancy Davis, objects conservator.

In 1999 the architecture, planning and engineering firm of Watson & Henry Associates was retained to implement an environmental monitoring program, to evaluate the temperature and relative humidity performance of the present heating, ventilating and air conditioning system, and to recommend ways to improve the interior environment for the benefit of the collections and the historic structure.

**F. What is the importance of this project to the institution?**

The age of the historic structure, geographical location, national stature and patriotic symbolism of the Betsy Ross House make the site vulnerable to many potential emergencies, both natural and manmade. Planning ahead for a disaster may prevent such events from taking place, as well as reduce the permanent damage and loss to the collections that may occur. The current staff of the BRH has taken strides to improve the way in which the collections have been managed. Several policies have recently been written and implemented for the long-term preservation of collections materials, including guidelines for collections registration, a Housekeeping Plan for the care of historic structures and artifacts, and an Integrated Pest Management Policy. An Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan would complement these policies and is the logical next step in sound collections management.

Two of the assessments listed in the response to Question E, the CAP and the MAP reports, recommend the creation of an Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan. In her CAP report Nancy Davis wrote: "It should be remembered that manmade disasters can threaten the collection. Examine the area within a five-mile radius for possible situations that could adversely impact the site or interfere with access to the site." The BRH is one of several high-profile landmarks located in the historic district of Philadelphia. It is less than one mile from Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell pavilion, and the U.S. Mint, all of which have been designated by the United States Department of Interior as "signature buildings", in other words, potential targets of terrorism. The site is also one-quarter of a mile from the Ben

Franklin Bridge, a major artery between Philadelphia and Camden County, New Jersey, and another potential target. In addition, the BRH is located in one of Philadelphia's most congested and bustling commercial districts. The House and grounds are adjacent to and surrounded by numerous residential and commercial buildings.

As was mentioned in the response to Question C, approximately 75% of the museum's 3-dimensional objects are on exhibition in the historic house and the gallery, which is located in the adjacent support building. Items in the 260-year old house are permanently displayed in period-furnished rooms and are separated from the visitors by floor to ceiling Plexiglas partitions. The objects in the gallery are displayed in Plexiglas cases. The aging structures are vulnerable to water infiltration, which may permanently damage or destroy the buildings and artifacts.

When not incorporated into an exhibition, most three-dimensional items are stored in archival cardboard boxes, on open metal shelves, in the basement of the annex building. The paper collections are kept in archival boxes in the loft of the annex building and the attic of the historic house. Although the staff acknowledges that basement, loft and attic conditions are not ideal to preserve objects of historical significance, the site's spatial limitations prevent most of the collections from being stored elsewhere. The Emergency Plan would address ways to improve storage conditions, thereby reducing the risk of disaster.

Collections records are stored in archival folders in a file cabinet in the collections manager's office. The file cabinet is not fireproof. At this time no duplicate copies of the collections records are kept off-site. Data for only one-third of the site's three-dimensional object collection has been entered into the collections management software, which is installed in a computer in the collections manager's office. A backup disk of the computer-cataloged information is kept off-site. Most of the paper-based archival collection has not yet been accessioned and organized, and duplicate copies of the items have not been made. Therefore, should the collections fall victim to a disaster, much of the information contained in these items would be lost.

Recognized as the third most visited historic site in Philadelphia and the ninth most visited historic house in the nation, it is imperative that this national treasure and its collections be protected. With the implementation of an Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan the goal would be to provide a more accessible and safe experience for visitors and to help better preserve the historic structures and collection for generations to come.

**G. What are the names and qualifications of the consultant(s) and staff involved in the project?**

The consultant for the project is Virgilia Rawnsley, the Director of Preservation Services for the CCAHA in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. CCAHA is one of the largest nonprofit regional conservation laboratories in the country. Since 1995 Ms. Rawnsley has been guiding institutions through the process of developing institutional disaster preparedness and response plans. She has and support to institutions that have experienced collections-related disasters.

Lisa Moulder is the Collections Manager of the Betsy Ross House. She has been working with historical museum collections for over five years and has worked at the BRH since July of 2000. In her current position Ms. Moulder is responsible for all aspects of collections care, including research, documentation, registration, preservation, storage and exhibition of both the three-dimensional object and archival collections.

Lori Dillard Rech is the Executive Director of the BRH. Her qualifications include 13 years of experience in the museum field, where she has worked in the Philadelphia area developing a wide range of educational and public programs. Through this she has gained practical knowledge in the interpretation and preservation of historic sites, notably Brandywine Battlefield and Fort Mifflin. She has been the Director of the BRH since February 2002 and brings to the project experience in supervising consultants, first-hand knowledge of the issues of the site, and a thorough review of prior reports.

Francis Fisher is the Facilities Manager of the BRH. He has worked for the site for eight years and is the staff member who is most familiar with the site's mechanical systems, including the fire protection and security systems and the heating, ventilating and air conditioning units.

#### **H. What are the plan of work and timetable for the project?**

February 2005

- Virgilia Rawnsley of CCAHA will visit BRH for one day to introduce the emergency planning process, interview relevant staff and survey the facilities and collections. Lisa Moulder will work with Ms. Rawnsley on collections needs, Francis Fisher will answer questions about the facilities and mechanical systems and Lori Dillard Rech will discuss overall concerns.

March 2005

- A report will be submitted to the BRH staff by Ms. Rawnsley, regarding the vulnerabilities with recommendations for mitigations of these risks.
- Ms. Rawnsley will meet with BRH staff to present and discuss vulnerabilities and needs for the Emergency Preparedness and Response manual.

May 2005

- Ms. Rawnsley will meet with BRH staff to develop an emergency "phone tree" and immediate procedures in the event of an emergency.
- Ms. Rawnsley will submit easy-to-use emergency response guidelines to the BRH staff in the form of a "flip-chart".

June 2005

- Ms. Rawnsley will complete the process of compiling a Disaster Preparedness and Response Manual for the BRH. The manual will include resources on salvage techniques for the types of materials found in the BRH. The plan will identify a list of supplies that should be stockpiled at the BRH for response in case of an emergency. Suppliers of these items will be provided by CCAHA.

- A follow-up site visit to the BRH will be conducted to present the plan and insure that it meets the administrative needs.
- Emergency response supplies will be acquired by Ms. Moulder and assembled into kits.
- Ms. Moulder will train the entire staff of the BRH in how to respond to emergencies.

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